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Cover Page Footnote

The author is grateful to the Noah Purifoy Foundation for their permission to reproduce the included photographs of the artist's work, to Sarah Sweeney for photography, and to the Skidmore College Faculty Development Committee for their financial support of research for this project; and to Lindsay Buchman for conversations on books and burial and to copanelists and audience members at the panel "Archives: Assembly, Decay, Canonization, Recovery" at ASAP/12, the 2021 annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present, for their feedback and comments on an earlier version of this work. In the section "Beyond the Book"

ON THE BLACK BOOK AS DURATIONAL: NOAH PURIFOY'S DESERT *LIBRARY*

Paul Benzon

A thing is a slow event.

—Stanley Eveling¹

Drive out into the desert and everything slows down: the air around you, the wheels of your car against the ground as it switches from asphalt to sand, time itself. Google Maps insists that you're still on the grid, but immediately all the lines start to warp; when you decelerate, everything starts to reveal nonlinearities.

A strange place to find a book, much less a library, even one such as this. The African American artist Noah Purifoy's *The Library of Congress* (1990) (fig. 1) is one of approximately thirty works that compose the ten-acre space of the Noah Purifoy Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Art in Joshua Tree, California.² The museum consists of a wide range of found-object junk sculptures by Purifoy, all deeply enmeshed within the space of the desert. Situated in the open air of Joshua Tree, each work is installed on the desert floor without protective walls or ceiling. The museum is open from sunup to sundown, 365 days a year. There is no entry booth, no fee, no barrier separating the museum from the space around it, no forward-facing staff as such—just a single trifold pamphlet to guide visitors as they wander through the space. The experience of this wandering is surreal and uncanny, the timeless, inhuman landscape covered with the decaying detritus of the human-built environment.

Many of Purifoy's works are large, capable of towering over or subsuming the human form: *Sculpture Defined* (1989–90), for example, is a twenty-four-foot-tall framework of water pipes, ladders, shovels, and other materials welded together; *San Francisco–Oakland Bridge* (1990), an assemblage of three ladder-like frames, is thirty feet tall at its highest point, connected by metal wire and cabling; and *The White House* (1991–93) is a twenty-by-twenty-by-forty-foot structure of discarded building material, logs, toilets, and statues, all painted white. *The Library of Congress*, by contrast, is more modest in size and scope, consisting of a rectangular



Figure 1. *The Library of Congress*, 1990. Courtesy of Noah Purifoy Foundation ©2022. Photo by Sarah Elizabeth Sweeney.

wooden frame on the desert floor, roughly eight by fifteen feet, weathered into irregularity. Within the frame are two threadbare easy chairs, their backs to a rusted stove with a shining steel chimney, facing a vertical grid of warped wire covered with tattered cloth, a porous demarcation of the space of the piece. Other weathered domestic detritus lies within the frame as well: a dilapidated wooden bench, a rusted bedframe, a toilet, and a sink. To one side of the chairs, just outside of the frame, sits an off-kilter, almost collapsing bookshelf, overstuffed with books warped and buckled by decades of exposure, unidentifiable in their compaction and decay, accompanied by a single warped 45 rpm record.

What might such a library have to tell us about libraries? What might we see—about the book as a material object, about the library and the archive as culturally situated spaces of Black memory, about the politics of bibliography, about inscription and storage as aesthetic and social practices—in its strange placement on the floor of the California desert? In this essay I read *The Library of Congress* for these questions, considering how Purifoy traces the relations among textuality, materiality, and history through his work with the codex as a found object. I write here as a white scholar of contemporary literature, media, and textual objects; my experience is both separate and different from Purifoy's, and I cannot directly know, experience, or lay claim to the history or memory his work excavates. Rather than attempt this, my goal here is to read Purifoy's work

with the codex and the library as found structures to theorize a poetics and politics of critically engaged experimental bibliographic art practice. Through the speculative transformations of Purifoy's assemblage, the book becomes a durational object, the material site for a politics of Black time and history: like the library that holds it, it serves as a site for thinking both of and through time. Purifoy's deployment of the book, I suggest, renders Black history as at once both solid and intangible across time, intertwined within a complex dynamic of archival storage and decay.

Book, Thing, Junk

Purifoy's work exists in a complex dialogue with theories of materiality popularized by Bill Brown and Jane Bennett. Establishing "thing theory" in the early 2000s, Brown imagined the thing as dynamic rather than static, a material category possessed of agency and energy. Articulating the thing as "less an object than a particular subject-object relation," he argued that its status inheres in "what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems."³ For Bennett, this uncanny excess of the thing is the source of the vibrant materiality that is central to her thinking. She sees things, whether the debris in a gutter or the infrastructure of an interstate power grid, as "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics." Things possess "a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension;" they exist as part of assemblages, "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts."⁴ This energy vibrates throughout the Desert Art Museum, both within individual artworks and across them. A work such as *No Contest* (1994), which sets two bicycles in tension atop a clapboard shack—one upright, one upside down—stands as a paradigmatic instance.⁵ Whereas one bicycle wheel might invoke the singular objecthood of the Duchampian ready-made, Purifoy activates the materials of *No Contest* by way of multiplicity and tension; the energies of the component objects and their materials—metal, rubber, wood, rope—reverberate against one another to reveal "a volatile but somehow functioning whole." As Bennett suggests, this whole is not only greater than the sum of its parts, but wholly different—materially, affectively, ecologically, and agentially: "the efficacy or effectivity to which [agency] has traditionally referred becomes

distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field.”⁶ Yet it is not only individual works by Purifoy that exhibit the intensities of assemblage, but indeed the space as a whole, a phenomenon visible in the installation of *Ode to Frank Gehry* (1999), an architectural structure clearly intended to evoke the Los Angeles architect’s signature spatial style, alongside the chromed, curvilinear shapes of *65 Aluminum Trays* (2002), which evokes Gehry’s aesthetic more atmospherically and indirectly.⁷ Indeed, at times it becomes difficult to isolate what constitutes particular artworks as one navigates the space, which feels as much a single installation as it does a museum of individual works.

What would it mean, then, to consider a library, *this* library, as an assemblage? We might consider this collection of codices as fractally vibrant at all levels of scale: individual books vibrating against one another, to be sure, but also pages against covers, pages against one another, recto against verso, inked characters against the substrate of the page, and the characters themselves within a given word against one another. These vibrations gain complexity in light of the fact that they happen outside of human view, as the books in *Library* cannot be read. While this seems self-evident, it is no small distinction; bleached and disintegrating under the sun, wind, and sand, these books resonate as defined by their material properties and dimensions rather than their discursive ones. Here we might also draw on Rosalind Krauss’s foundational formulation of sculpture in the expanded field as “a kind of ontological absence, the combination of exclusions, the sum of the neither/nor . . . the *not-landscape* and the *not-architecture*” in order to understand the vibrancy of the books in Purifoy’s *Library*.⁸ As Krauss’s formulation suggests, *Library* is a work neither of landscape nor of architecture but rather—or perhaps also—of haptic textuality, the codex form, and the archive as built textual space. Rendered unreadable, the book becomes a thing in Purifoy’s work, its vibrant materiality signifying over and above its alphabetic or discursive textuality. Refiguring Krauss’s spatial categories around the codex, Purifoy reveals a series of productive paradoxes: *Library*’s contents are not books, and at the same time, they are not things. They vibrate in space, yet in the open air of the museum they themselves *are* space, everting the closed, protective architectures of the conventional library and the conventional codex. Indeed, the books in *Library* demarcate space in the desert through their contiguity and compaction: fused together by time and the elements, they become a single whole that is at once both more than the sum of its parts and also irreducible to those parts.

The assemblage of *Library* exemplifies a political engagement with objecthood that characterized Purifoy’s work throughout his career.

After graduating from the Chouinard Art Institute (now known as the California Institute of the Arts) as one of its first African American students and serving as the first director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, he played a central role in the organization and production of *66 Signs of Neon*, a group exhibition in Los Angeles staged in the wake of the 1965 Watts uprisings. For *66 Signs*, Purifoy and seven other artists produced sixty-six assemblage and found-object sculptures using materials sourced from the remnants of the uprisings, which Purifoy described in the exhibition catalog as “three tons of charred wood, and fire-molded debris.”⁹ While some of Purifoy’s works in the exhibition were broadly representational—for example, *Sir Watts*, a medieval torso adorned with safety pins, forks, and other detritus—others deployed debris from the uprisings more abstractly, such as *Pressure*, a work consisting solely of a flattened steel can, contorted and melted by heat.¹⁰

Through this usage of material from the uprisings, Purifoy staged a key divergence from the use of assemblage and the ready-made by white European modernists. Yael Lipschutz claims that the exhibition “constituted a Duchampian approach to the fire-ravaged alleys of Watts” and describes Purifoy’s work across his career as “rooted in the theory and the primacy of the ready-made and in the Watts Rebellion.”¹¹ The connection Lipschutz makes here is undoubtedly resonant within Purifoy’s art. Yet to tilt the balance of that connection too far toward the Duchampian is to erase both the situated political specificity of his work as a Black artist in postwar America, and, more broadly, a vibrant intensity that Lisa Uddin describes as “the racializing power that radiates from material things and sites.”¹² Indeed, while Duchamp’s work with the ready-made begins with the quotidian and exalts it to the point of parody, Purifoy’s work disavows such conceptual luxuries. After all, the found objects at stake in *66 Signs* are not simply the mundane or the merely discarded but rather the destroyed, distorted products of racialized capitalism, bearing histories of trauma, damage, and disuse that enfold the Watts uprisings as well as the deep-seated conditions that produced them.¹³ Junk, then, is far from an ideologically blank category. No object is ever simply discarded in a vacuum; on the contrary, disposal always already exists within an economy of material, capital, and power, as does recontextualization of the sort that characterizes Purifoy’s work. As Brian Bartell theorizes it, junk sculpture such as Purifoy’s is “not just about devaluation but, most importantly, about how it can be the basis for new forms of value and is connected to a longer history of African Diasporic ‘creative’ resistance to racial capitalism dating to plantation slavery.”¹⁴ If, as Bennett suggests, the disposability of capitalism—an effect that can never be fully disentangled

from race—“conceals the vitality of matter,” Purifoy’s work excavates that vitality at the extreme as a means not only of creative resistance but also of survival and persistence over and through time.¹⁵

In *Library*, this survival and persistence takes place by way of the book as a device of both textual and material storage. If the context of junk as source material is crucial to the political work of junk art, this context ramifies differently for the book as a thing than it does for other materials. As Bartell and Uddin suggest, junk sculptures and assemblages engage in a kind of politics of the ready-made, rendering the (seemingly only) material newly visible as (always already) textual—as located in a history of material and environmental inequity. *Library*, then, redoubles this condition: it begins with the textual as a ready-made and situates it within a network of assemblage that, per Krauss, is neither wholly textual nor wholly material but rather some place simultaneously between, across, and wholly outside those domains. To title the work *The Library of Congress* in particular is to compound this play of signification and materiality further still. Most foundationally, it recasts the massive, totalizing archive of the state: the foundational house—in the Derridean sense of the *arkheion*—of the United States’ history of white supremacy becomes localized, vernacular, and domestic, defined not by archiving or preservation as such but rather by a complex relationship to use, decay, disorder, and temporality.¹⁶ Through this shift, Purifoy also aligns the archive with a specifically Black historical poetics, moving it from institutional structure and regimentation—“tightly ordered . . . inorganic . . . staged for linear reading,” as artist, writer, and learner Kameelah Janan Rasheed puts it—into something akin to (albeit certainly not synonymous with) the domestic Black space Rasheed describes as “liv[ing] under your mama’s bed:” private but not hidden, grounded in individualization but still accessible, preserving culture through the quotidian rather than in spite of it.¹⁷

What books constitute this *Library*? What histories, ideas, articulations do those books hold as texts, as things? Precisely because the work’s central materials are, at least at one level and at one moment in their life-cycle, texts, asking such questions of this work means something fundamentally different from asking questions of the source materials of other ready-made works—of the building materials for *The White House*, for example, or the trays of *65 Aluminum Trays*, or even the industrial origins of Duchamp’s *Fountain*.¹⁸ And yet of course due to the deterioration of the work, these questions are as unanswerable as they are urgent: it might have been possible to know these things at the time of the work’s production and installation, but that time has long passed, and to my

knowledge no photographs exist that would shed light on these materials. In this sense, then, to title this work *The Library of Congress* is also inevitably to destabilize the locatability that the Library of Congress stands for, a locatability that is central to normative conceptions of bibliography and history. There are no call numbers available for the books in Purifoy's library; they are at once both organized and stored and also unmoored and unmarked within the time and space of the desert. To locate the *Library* as a text is, in this sense, as impossible as locating a text within the *Library*.

This unmoored vibration of the codex is deeply historical and political. Huey Copeland describes Purifoy's work as being engaged in the same "temporal oscillation between geologic and anthropocentric time" as that of canonical earthworks artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer, with the notable difference that Purifoy works with found, anthropogenic objects rather than with the land itself. Rather than the existential temporal abstraction of an artist such as Smithson, then, *Library's* engagement with duration and environment through the objecthood of the book imagines the sweep of time as intensely human, intensely present in every sense of the word. "The racial uprising," Copeland writes, "the social emergency, the ongoing disaster of Western conquest and civilization are terminal cataclysms that are always arriving," and perhaps also always persisting.¹⁹ Exposed in the desert—a space of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and ecological trauma—*Library* stands as a kind of temporal and historical hinge, looking simultaneously forward and backward across the endless arrivals that Copeland names. Its persistence vibrates across time—to manifest destiny in the western desert, to the violences and ruptures of the twentieth century and beyond, from Watts back to Tulsa, Wilmington, and further into the past. It stores these histories without writing them, by not writing them: it compacts them and holds them across time in its own vulnerable, ephemeral persistence.

Time, Decay, Accumulation

If these histories are present in *Library*, they are present only by way of absence, of intangibility; its books are, as it were, used otherwise, outside of our view and touch. Silently turning over the question of storage and memory, *Library* constitutes a performative play on the archive, speculatively recalibrating its boundaries and protocols. Here decay paradoxically serves as itself a means of preservation, bringing to both the individual books in the *Library* and to the work, as a whole, what Shannon Dawdy describes as patina.

For Dawdy, patina constitutes not only the “antique aesthetic” of old objects but also “a triangular relationship between time, materiality, and the social imaginary,” the bodying forth of “the intimate relationships that can develop between old objects and humans, both as a historical accumulation and as a dynamic in the present.” Her theory draws on Svetlana Boym’s framework of reflective nostalgia, which “emphasizes the look of age and the contrasts between past and present. [Reflective nostalgia] engages with history as a resource for utopian alternatives to the present.” Dawdy in turn suggests patina as a defining characteristic of what she terms critical nostalgia, an engagement with history that goes beyond Boym’s realm of the ideational to enter into “nostalgic *practices* and material *things* as world-making.” As central to this world-making, “[p]atina is not only a political aesthetic but a political *force* flowing through alternative circuits of value that are both moral and material.”²⁰ Given the centrality of history and historical accumulation to the aesthetic and force of patina, it is no coincidence that Dawdy focuses on New Orleans—a site layered with the historical accumulations and present dynamics of the transatlantic slave trade—as a crucial space of patina. Indeed, while New Orleans hardly has a monopoly on patina, it is a crucially generative site for the long history of patina’s coconstitutive relationship with American Blackness. This relationship took on additional layerings and complexities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, with the “multihued encrustation that water and mold left in horizontal strata upon houses, possessions, and even the people” of the city providing an environmental marker—at once both figurative and literal, constituted both as aesthetic and as force—of racialized trauma.²¹

Library exists within a space that seems the polar opposite of New Orleans: a predominantly white census-designated place of barely 7,500 residents rather than a racially diverse, majority-Black city of several hundred thousand. Its desert location and ecosystem are likewise paradigmatically different from those of New Orleans as a peninsular port city. Yet its suffusion with patina situates it within this same long history. No component of its space is shielded from the elements: light, heat, wind, sand. The wood of the installation’s bookshelf and its outer frame are weathered, thinned and dried from time. The white covering on its easy chairs is peeling away, revealing their foam cushioning and wooden frames underneath. Everything metal is rusted; everything in fabric is tattered, jagged, distressed. The bookshelf itself is barely intact and upright, loosely held together by thin, undulating wire. The texts inside are stacked unevenly, whether by intent or by slippage we cannot know. They twist and torque in three dimensions, stretching outside of the rectangularity

of the book block shape. Their pages are brittle, bleached, disintegrating as if dried in the sun, soaked by infrequent rain, and then dried again, partially pulped over and over (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Detail of *The Library of Congress*, 1990. Courtesy of Noah Purifoy Foundation ©2022. Photo by Sarah Elizabeth Sweeney.

It would be easy, perhaps even tempting, to see in *Library* a romanticized, depoliticized version of patina on the codex and the archive: think here of the quaintness of the used book as a cultural and affective signifier, a rarefied, romanticized fetish object at once seemingly both within and outside of the circuits of capital and commodity reproduction, or perhaps of the commodity fetish of the first edition. To imagine the book in this way is to see it as an object of the past—indeed, as being defined by the cracks and marks that signify its aged condition—but at the same time to paradoxically imagine it as outside of any larger history. But Purifoy’s work frames patina differently from this, as both an aesthetic and a force, to use Dawdy’s terms. When asked in an interview whether he is “concerned with the works’ deterioration,” he responds, “No, no, maintenance is not my business. I don’t do maintenance. I do artwork. If it wants to deteriorate, I find some kind of gratification in watching nature participate in the creative process. . . . I don’t destroy the integrity of the object itself. Because I respect the object, whatever it was designed for, when I put it in an assemblage, it’s only to extend the life of it. It’s not to destroy it.”²² Two points seem notable here: first, the simple fact that deterioration is not oppositional to the work,

or even incidental, but rather integral, a constitutive element of the creative process—as much as anything else, *Library* is a site for accumulating and storing patina. Moreover, underscoring the importance of this accumulation, Purifoy also articulates a tension at the heart of how *Library*, and indeed the desert works as a whole, mobilize patina across time: deterioration is not destruction but rather preservation and extension.

Here it might be instructive to contrast *Library* with another site-specific, codex-based durational artwork, Jordan Scott and Stephen Collis's 2009 project, *Decomp*.²³ In *Decomp*, Scott and Ellis placed copies of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in different ecosystems in British Columbia, leaving them there to decay for a year and then photographing the results and using them as the basis for a series of impressionistic poems. *Decomp* mobilizes Darwin's book as a thing in order to self-consciously think the scalar difference between anthropocentric and geological time; within the project, the decay of the codex serves as a point of departure for reimagining how human conceptions of nature might be foundationally, materially rewritten by nature. Both works, then, are deeply concerned with temporality and textual materiality, and at least on the surface, the result of *Decomp* seems similar to that of *Library*: tattered pages, at times even shredded, materially transformed by time spent unprotected in the elements. Like Purifoy, Scott and Collis center the project on an openness to the aleatory impact of the environment, an approach encapsulated in the closing sentence of Jonathan Skinner's foreword to the project's published book: "A worm finds its way through fibre, indifferent to the letter."²⁴ Yet while *Library* foregrounds a book-based aesthetics of durational collection and installation, *Decomp* seems closer to an aesthetics of durational performance. The finished product's highly aestheticized images—hyper-close-up representations of page fragments in shallow depth of field against grass, rocks, and greenery, the grain of the photograph echoing the grain of the page—underscore *Decomp* as an endeavor to produce patina for its own sake as an end goal, a kind of rarefied ruin porn of the codex. *Library*, by contrast, not only preserves through patina but also preserves patina itself through the book and the library as simultaneously enduring and decaying structures: over time, the work becomes not only a source of patina but also increasingly *about* patina, an ongoing meditation on the material ways in which history becomes embedded in the text as a vibrant thing, materially present and yet still untouchable.

Archive, Anarchive, Flight

While this aesthetic characterizes all of Purifoy's work in the Desert Art Museum, it ramifies in particularly layered and salient ways in relation to the thing as codexical and textual, particularly in the larger context of Black experimental art practices. Musician and poet Sun Ra writes that "words are seeds you plant in the ground."²⁵ This is, at least at face value, a metaphor. But given Ra's speculative philosophy, we might also take it literally—to place a thing of words in or on the earth is to commit it to transform over time, to become a different thing, marking time not in its words but in its materiality. Dub reggae producer Lee "Scratch" Perry's practice of burying "unprotected tapes in the soil outside of his studio" in order to transform them materially and thus sonically suggests a similarly material and environmental approach to storage media writ large.²⁶ Planting, installation, and burial are a kind of inscription, as is everything that comes after them. Here we might see *Library* within a longer genealogy of Black ecological metastorage, of artists who place storage material—the word, the codex, the master tape—within or against the earth, rendering these things durational, gestational sites for accumulating Black history. In these gestures, bibliography verges on the botanical, the chemical, the alchemical. Committing a Black book, a Black library, to the earth is a speculative gesture in time, although not necessarily the deep time of the Anthropocene that informs *Decomp*. Instead, *Library* figures a layered, palimpsestic time of Black modernity in and on the codex, recording history as it vibrates back and forth between accumulation and decay.

Anthony Reed's thinking on the hip hop producer James Yancey, better known as J Dilla, provides an instructive framework for thinking about the Black temporality of Purifoy's *Library*. Dilla's production technique is perhaps most notable for its play with time in both its content and its form: his music often draws on deeply archival sonic samples—texts in which we might hear patina, dust on vinyl, the material aging of sound and its substrate—yet he is far from alone among his generational peers in this. More significantly and uniquely, Dilla also used the MPC3000 drum machine to program beats whose rhythmic elements often occurred microscopically before or after the human ear would naturally anticipate them, milliseconds off standard, digitally regimented straight rhythmic time. Dan Charnas describes this effect as Dilla Time, "the deliberate juxtaposition of multiple expressions of straight and swing time simultaneously, a conscious cultivation of rhythmic friction." Within Dilla Time,

Charnas suggests, “any element could be slid around to mess with time” in a kind of “temporal sabotage.”²⁷ Pushing and pulling rhythm, Dilla’s production reveals cracks and openings in time.

Much as with *Library*’s physical materiality, time persists and accumulates within the sonic materiality of Dilla’s work. Indeed, time is a common aesthetic and ontological concern in critical theorizations of hip hop production, with many foundational accounts framing sampling as a kind of looped return of the past.²⁸ Reed makes clear, however, that Dilla’s work engages an archival temporality of persistence and continuity: in contrast to the archival work of much of hip hop production, he sees Dilla as an anarchist, an artist who “reminds us that we share a horizon of time with the archival object, and stresses that shared time rather than the generational or sonic distances between now and then . . . thinking the relationship between Africa and the diaspora as one of circulation and simultaneity rather than consigning Africa to an atemporal pastness.”²⁹ This simultaneity is not, or not only, the simultaneity of cataclysm; it is also the simultaneity of persistence and survival, of persistence *as* survival—what Reed describes as “the mid-tempo grooves of the ordinary present for the black urban majority. . . . The [ordinary] time of nothing in particular happening, the time of thinking, of keeping alive. The time of extended sociality or recovery, the time of self-care and maintenance. Given the proximity of black life to sudden, violent death, the ordinary time of black life is the unthinkable itself” that Dilla’s music—and Purifoy’s *Library*—offer an anarchival opening to think. If John Coltrane’s sound is “the sound of something to live *for*,” Reed suggests, “Dilla’s is more something to live *with*.”³⁰ Purifoy’s work imagines a similarly anarchival time of Black survival: the Black book persisting in the desert, vulnerable, ephemeral, unreadable, but still present. Gathering patina, gathering time but also remaining within time, *Library* presents a library to live with.

Purifoy seems to anticipate this anarchival time early in his career, in the poem “A Book Flown,” written to promote *66 Signs of Neon*:

These fragmentations only mean that
 I am fragmented,
 That as I symbolize what you say and agree
 Can I then leave you
 To set these lines in order,
 Assemble them into a book
 And by the first strong winds,
 Permit its leaves to be torn from its cover.
 Let them fly high and, like leaves,

Light into the lap of the Universe
 Separate of and by themselves
 Within without complete
 Yet incomplete.³¹

In a few short lines, we see Purifoy not only thematize the project of the exhibition and his career more broadly—framing fragments as “sites of the possible” in Colin McFarlane’s terms, “more than just the wastes of historical racialized violence”—but also write an anarchival history of the Black book: the codex composed and decomposed, compiled, bound, unbound, and dispersed into the Universe.³² Yet if the scattered, everted, “Within without” book he imagines here is a kind of aleatory, vibrating assemblage, at once together and apart, “complete / Yet incomplete,” the books in *Library* do not take flight in the same way. They are fragmented, subject to “strong winds” and other elements—light, heat, cold, sand, history—but they remain stable, their location fixed. Yet it is precisely this sitedness of Purifoy’s *Library* within space that allows it to move within and through time. Its stillness excavates and compiles a material history through slow decay, through complex circuits of ephemerality and vulnerability as preservation and persistence. Ever more incomplete, yet somehow also ever closer to complete.

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NOTES

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1. Qtd. in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production,” *Museum International* 56, no. 1–2 (May 2004): 52–65, quotation on 59.
2. Noah Purifoy, *The Library of Congress*, 1990, wood, books, old rags and household objects, 8 × 15 feet, Noah Purifoy Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Art, Joshua Tree, California.
3. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1–22, quotation on 4–5.

4. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5, 20, 23.
5. Noah Purifoy, *No Contest*, 1994, peeler poles, redwood shingles, and old bicycles, 2 × 14 × 16 feet, Noah Purifoy Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Art, Joshua Tree, California. This work's Duchamp-times-four focus on the wheel as ready-made exemplifies the “junk dada” aesthetic that gave a 2015 retrospective of Purifoy's work at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art its name.
6. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23.
7. Noah Purifoy, *Ode to Frank Gehry*, 1999, building materials, 15.8 × 16 × 12 feet, Noah Purifoy Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Art, Joshua Tree, California; and Noah Purifoy, *65 Aluminum Trays*, 2002, aluminum trays, Noah Purifoy Desert Art Museum of Assemblage Art, Joshua Tree, California.
8. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (1979): 30–41, quotation on 36–37.
9. Qtd. In Yael Lipschutz, “66 Signs of Neon and the Transformative Art of Noah Purifoy,” in *L.A. Object & David Hammons Body Prints*, ed. Connie Rogers Tilton and Lindsay Charlwood (New York: Tilton Gallery, 2011), 214–59, quotation on 217.
10. Noah Purifoy, *Sir Watts*, ca. 1966, mixed media; and Noah Purifoy, *Pressure*, 1966, mixed media, 17 × 14 × 2 inches, Noah Purifoy Foundation, Joshua Tree, California.
11. Yael Lipschutz, “A NeoHooDoo Western: Noah Purifoy, Spirit Flash, Art, and the Desert,” in *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, org. Franklin Sirmans with Yael Lipschutz (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015), 40–59, quotation on 47.
12. Lisa Uddin, “And Thus Not Glowing Brightly: Noah Purifoy's Junk Modernism,” in *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020), 308–23, quotation on 311.
13. Writing of Purifoy's work in an architectural context, Lisa Uddin notes how it speaks back to the socioeconomic “procedures of dereliction that yoked normative architectural modernism to whiteness and ravaged urban sites and objects to blackness.” “And Thus,” 310.
14. Brian Bartell, “Noah Purifoy's Aesthetic for the Racial Capitalocene: Reading 66 Signs of Neon,” *Cultural Critique* 112 (Summer 2021): 24–58, quotation on 25.
15. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 5.
16. Derrida notes that “the meaning of ‘archive,’ its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded.” *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.
17. Kameelah Janan Rasheed, *No New Theories* (New York: Printed Matter, 2019), np. Rasheed notes that the seemingly “coherent term ‘archive’ . . . actually feels quite incoherent, but at times, wonderfully so;” the same might be said here of the archive itself as a physical space.
18. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, porcelain urinal, 12 × 15 × 18 inches, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
19. Huey Copeland, “Noah Purifoy,” *Artforum International* 54, no. 2 (October 2015), <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201508/noah-purifoy-54977>.

20. Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 4–7; emphasis in original.
21. Dawdy, *Patina*, 1.
22. Noah Purifoy, interview by C. Ian White, in Sirmans and Lipschutz, *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*, 105, 107.
23. Another potential point of resonance is Katie Paterson’s *Future Library*, a project started in 2014 with the planting of one thousand trees in Nordmarka, a forest outside of Oslo, Norway, and in progress until 2114, when the resulting paper will be used to print a series of books. See Paul Benzon, “On Unpublishing: Fugitive Materiality and the Future of the Anthropocene Book,” in *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, ed. Annette Gilbert (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 282–94, on temporality and textual materiality in Paterson’s project.
24. Jonathan Skinner, “Earth Works: Field Notes on *Decomp*,” in Jordan Scott and Stephen Collis, *Decomp* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2013), 7.
25. Qtd. in Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 127.
26. Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 160.
27. Dan Charnas, *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm* (New York: MCD, 2022), 146, 144.
28. See, for example, Paul Gilroy, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and The Challenge of a Changing Same,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 111–36; Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), chap. 3; and James A Snead, “On Repetition in Black Culture,” *Black American Literature Forum* 15, no. 4 (1981): 146–54.
29. Anthony Reed, “Stay Black and Live: J Dilla as Anarchivist,” *In Pursuit of Sacred Words* (blog), February 8, 2014, <https://thesacredwords.wordpress.com/2014/02/08/stay-black-and-live-j-dilla-as-anarchivist/>. Reed defines an anarchist as taking “an anarchist-inflected approach to sampling that at its most transgressive makes us pay attention to familiar voices . . . in new ways that make us think of [them] as our contemporary.” This conception, resonant with Rasheed’s image of the archive that lives “under your mama’s bed,” is notably different from that of Akira Mizuta Lippit, who defines the anarchivist as that which archives “otherwise. . . . The open archive exposes, it reveals outward. . . . The other archive, the shadow or anarchivist . . . is an archive that, in the very archival task of preserving, seeks to repress, efface, and destine its own interiority into oblivion.” Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 11; emphasis in original.
30. Reed, “Stay Black and Live”; emphasis in original.
31. “A Book Flown,” 1967 by Noah Purifoy. Qtd. in Colin McFarlane, *Fragments of the City: Making and Remaking Urban Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), 131.
32. McFarlane, 131.

